As the only researchers of their kind in the area, some of their work has been appreciated among the public. "I had this degree in biology that I never did anything with," said Holmberg, 53, who works as a technical writer for Honda Motor Co. "This just kind of satisfied the inner biologist in me." "Any extra set of eyes helps," said Joanna Arlukiewicz, 28, a graphic designer who has been a researcher on staff with the Ocean Conservation Society for six years. "We spend the money." "You could spend $75 just for a regular boat ride," she added. "For this, I'll gladly see Discovery Channel, for instance -- I think a lot of people would want to know, 'How do they know?"'" 

For the record, McGrath is a birdwatcher, not a scientist. But on this day, he may as well be a biologist thanks to a ride-along program run by the Ocean Conservation Society of Southern California, which lets anyone who's interested join the research team and get a good view.

The ride-along program was started recently to help offset growing project costs, depending on the project. The course follows the coastline up to around Point Dume, where a massive underwater canyon a few miles offshore pushes nutrients toward the surface. "Being in the point means you almost guaranteed sightings," said Arlukiewicz, who helps out several times per month in addition to doing Web design.

"I went up to the water and the dolphins were just swimming by," she said. "And then they would disappear, and then they would reappear. It was just amazing to see them do that." The ride-along program, in contrast, doesn't require a scientific background. It is open to anyone who is willing to pay $75 and who wants to spend a day at sea looking for dolphins.

"If you've never seen a dolphin before," Arlukiewicz said, "you're going to be surprised. If you've seen them before, you're going to see them in a different way. They're incredible.""